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ABSTRACT

An overview of conflict management as it relates to the role of the principal is presented. The traditional approach to conflict, which minimizes conflict and emphasizes social control, is contrasted with the perspective that views conflict as inevitable, functional, and manageable. Intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts, functions of conflict, methods of conflict resolution, and the role of the administrator are discussed. Guidelines for dealing with conflict situations involving students, teachers, parents, and community are offered. A conclusion is that successful conflict resolution requires interpersonal communication skills, awareness of environmental factors, and recognition of conflict as an inherent, functional element of the educational system. (10 references) (LMI)

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THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL AS A MANAGER OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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THE ROLE OF THE ADMINISTRATOR AS A MANAGER OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict has been said to exist whenever incompatible activities occur. An advantage of this definition is that it addresses conflict within as well as between individuals and organizations. According to Campbell (1983), conflict has a negative connotation; whereas, we usually think of competition as a healthy process. Competition is a fundamental value of the American economic system, and out society tends to reward those who compete most successfully--that is win. In contrast, when two teachers engage in a dispute over which of them should be able to teach the most desirable classes in their school, a conflict could result.

Knezevice (1975) points out the traditional approach to conflict in the operation of schools was to hide it, ignore it, and above all never admit that it exists in a school that you administer. Very little was written about conflict in school administration textbooks until recently because, presumably,m it did not exist, and it made administrators uncomfortable to even discuss it. On the other hand, much had been written about control. In a school system under control, it was felt that conflict could be avoided.

Conflict is inevitable in all complex organizations, such as schools, that are social institutions. The sources of tensions and disruptions in schools are multiple and varied.

There are many types of conflicts. The first type is intrapersonal

conflicts. According to Zuelke (1987), intrapersonal conflict occurs within the self and emerges because the individual has difficulty in choosing personal goals. Intrapersonal conflicts can be broken down into three areas: (1) between two positive outcomes, (2) between a positive and negative outcome and (3) between two negative outcomes. Difficulty arises when the choice is between two negative outcomes, and intrapersonal conflict may often result. A second type of conflict is interpersonal conflict which commonly involves two or more parties. In school situations, it is possible to have several groups in conflict. Principals may often have to consider teachers, students, and parents in certain conflicts. In resolving these types of conflicts, Zuelke says Thomas (1987) presents five administrative styles, including assertion and cooperation. Assertion is the desire to satisfy one's own concerns while cooperation is to satisfy the concerns of others. Principals selecting these methods tend to isolate themselves in their offices, remaining neutral and seeking to avoid conflict.

Principals who choose dominating behavior try to reach pre-determined goals without respect for the interest of others. They may try to win while others lose. Sometimes this is effective. The effectiveness of this assertive style depends upon congruities between the participants in a conflict.

A third style of interpersonal conflict management is accommodative. Principles utilizing this style accept both reasonable and unreasonable requests from teachers and parents. This style sometimes makes the principal abandon his leadership responsibility and may seriously reduce the effectiveness of the school in reaching its goal.

The fourth style is compromise which is the result of a balance

between assertion and cooperation in resolving a conflict which results in partial satisfaction and partial dissatisfaction to the disputing parties.

The collaborative style is characterized by trust, candidness, and an understanding of varying points of view. Collaborative principals turn conflict into problem solving exercises involving all parties to the dispute. Communication between the parties is very often enhanced, and long-term solutions to the conflicts are sought.

Getzels 1968) points out that one type of intrapersonal conflict occurs as a function of certain dislocations in the form of opposing needs and dispositions within the personality. The effect of such personal instability or maladjustment is to keep the person at odds with the institution. Disagreement among complementary role incumbents as to their mutual rights sand obligations may also cause interpersonal conflicts.

One type of interpersonal conflict is with students at the school. This occurs because many students like to exert more influence in promoting change in their schools. According to Gorton (1972), it appears that the major thrust of student activism is in the direction of increasing the influence of young people over those aspects of school life which affect them the most. "At the heart of the issue is the question of how much freedom should students have and how much authority should administrators have." Principals can work to resolve this conflict by:

1. Engaging in an evaluation of the extent to which the teaching methods, curriculum, and student rules and regulations in the school are accomplishing their intended purposes and whether

these intended purposes are based on an educational rationale which is tenable in terms of the needs of the students as well as the needs of the organization.

2. Planning and initiating your own programs of student activism or student involvement.
3. Keeping channels of communication open and well-publicized.
4. Establishing a school-wide or district-wide policy on student dissent.
5. Helping students learn how to bring about change in a nonviolent manner.

Unresolved conflict and pressure for change are two contributory factors to the stress experienced by teachers. Other significant sources of anxiety are role conflict and role overload. Most of these result from pressures placed on teachers and arise from increased work load associated with organizational and curricular changes. The expectations of a society with changing values, in which young people are developing attitudes and behaviors quite different from those of the past, represent additional sources of pressure. Lack of promotion prospects, deteriorating working conditions and uncertainty about the future are others. This situation is often referred to as "teacher burnout." Dennison (1987) states that these are all causes of conflict.

Chernow (1976) suggests ways to deal with a teacher who has an emotional outburst. He says the best thing you can do is to let him talk--and keep him talking. While he is talking, the principal listens. The principal should not argue, interrupt, or contradict. Give him a chance to blow off some steam. When the emotional pressure has dropped, his temper will cool.

When two or more staff people are involved in a clash, it is important for the principal to remain neutral. A principal must resist the temptation of giving one combatant the idea that you are really with him, while giving his adversary the same impression. This could be used against the principal in the future. The principal should never refer to the incident after it has blown over.

Conflict often arises when parents are not satisfied with the academic program, security, or the way they perceive the school is being run. Communicating with parents is vital to successful school programs according to Chernow (1976), there are several ideas for involving parents including:

1. Having the school buses pick up parents and bring them to school for visits or special events. This may bring parents who have never been in the school before.
2. Invite parent volunteers to teach students in small groups, sharing any specialized knowledge the parents may have.
3. Hold mini-sessions to help parents understand curriculum areas.
4. Arrange event in which parents and pupils can take part.
5. Seek out parent volunteers for: remedial work, lunch duty, trip companions, special education tutors, making learning materials under the direction of a teacher, and helping out in the school office.
6. Invite parents to serve as judges for science fairs, spelling bees, art shows, and talent shows.

Also the principal can build bridges between the school and parents by urging parents to do the following:

1. Call the school to check out facts when they hear a rumor

either from their child or from a neighbor.

2. Bring any special talent or skill they may have to their child's classroom.
3. Call the principal when a problem arises of when a crisis occurs at home.
4. Arrange a meting with the guidance counselor to go over their child's record card or learn his latest achievement test scores.

He also states that another way to strengthen the partnership of parents and the school administrators is to engage in a common project that will aid the children. Most parents are willing to leave the job of running the school to the professional school administrator. It is only when they are turned off by an unconcerned or uncaring school principal that they look to take over control of the school.

From time to time, according to Mills (1976), unions have made unreasonable demands upon boards of education and administrators. With money tight, union demands have exceeded the capabilities of many school districts. Strikes, agency shops, teacher dismissals, employment of substitute teachers to break strikes, unfair labor practices, mediation, fact finding, delayed opening of schools and countless hours at the bargaining table have brought major problems to the schools. Sharp divisions and conflict have developed between employees and the schools. In many communities, people resent the constant turmoil that accompanies teachers' strikes. One truth is clear: Groups must reconcile differences and keep in mind that the education of our children is of the utmost importance.

Lewis (1970) offers some guidelines for administrators during a

teachers' strike. They are:

1. Be cool! Consider it as an opportunity to deal with a school crisis. You will be an expert when it is over.
2. Be prepared! Have a strike plan, as you will know it is coming before it occurs. Keep your administrators informed so they can effectively follow out your strike policies.
3. Keep the schools open, if possible! Call in available substitutes. Secure help from neighboring school districts. Ask P.T.A. members and parents to help.
4. Have someone listen to the news media! Knowing what teachers are saying will help you in preparing your news releases and guiding your actions.
5. Take pictures of the striking teachers! Think of the psychological effect upon the striking teachers when they realize their picture is being taken.
6. Control your telephone calls! Be available only to administrators, school board members, the leader of the striking teachers, and the news media.
7. Talk with the news media. Make them aware that you regret that the education of the students has been affected and that you will make every effort to resolve the disruption, and that your plans are to continue to keep the schools open.
8. Do not contact the striking teachers within the first twenty-four hours. Let the teachers blow off steam for the first day.
9. Don't trust the state educational organizations!
10. Don't use name-calling tactics!
11. Use legal counsel sparingly!

12. Be pleasant and friendly with striking teachers! Be warm and kind--but firm.

13. Agree only to reasonable demands!

14. Let the strikers appear to be winners!

15. Don't hold a grudge!

Successful school-community relations depend greatly upon the volunteers who serve on the board of education and serve the individual schools. Mills (1976) states that for centuries, citizens in the community have depended upon schools for moral and scholastic leadership. When their perceptions of how this should be accomplished does not agree, conflict may develop. If educators are to be respected leaders within a community, positive school-community relations must be maintained. All public school employees and board members must realize that they are entrusted with the welfare of a community's youth. The principal's role is to fulfill the trust of the community and to promote the welfare of the school in order to have positive school-community relations. When an issue has been resolved and board of education policy is established, the principal must use his administrative decision-making knowledge and skills within a perspective of contingency leadership to implement the policy.

Principals must recognize differences as desirable according to Wiles (1967). They must seek to have their staffs accept and value differences as a source of motivation. With this in mind, there is a place for all in the same group. If differences are unacceptable, more than one group is inevitable. If attention can be focused on a definite problem, and if the staff can think through to a solution, the first steps toward building a group are taken. The principal plays an

important role in bringing these elements together. In the attempt to help a staff become a cohesive group, the principal's function to bring people together and to guide the group in such a way that all involved will have ample opportunity to reach mutually acceptable decisions.

The principal works constantly with conflict. He must recognize that one of his primary contributions to the group is to help individuals within the group resolve the differences that exist among them and to work for common purposes that they have decided upon. Some mistaken principals attempt to suppress this disagreement. They think they can control it. In reality, all they do is drive it below the surface and constantly struggle with the unseen disagreement that they have not resolved. The skillful principal is not threatened by conflict. He does not seek to avoid it. He recognizes that it is the essence of group interaction and that hiss role is to help the group use it.

Muth, according to Dennison (1987), says that however well organized a school, and whatever its success in sustaining an adaptive environment, conflict--disagreement about the outcome of behavior--is quite unavoidable. The job of the principal is not to view such occurrences as indicative of failures, and therefore events to be overlooked, or even avoided. Instead, concentration should focus on two main issues--the control of conflict and its resolution. Conflict control seeks to prevent the negative consequences from getting out of hand and attempts to restore equilibrium. In contrast, conflict resolution considers the positive of why individuals and groups get into opposing positions, by accepting that genuine difference in needs, values, and goals provide an essential component of school life.

It can be argued that, if managed appropriately, conflict avoids

stagnation while stimulating interest. It, therefore, provides a means through which problems can be raised and solutions sought. If the principal helps provide a means by which teachers can assess their own views and judgments against those of others, so that they can appreciate the potential for conflict, this may help promote motivation and self-esteem. He feels the paradox is that the potential for conflict heightens in organizations which lack individuals able both to devise procedures and to exercise the appropriate interpersonal skills to contain and resolve the conflicts that emerge.

According to Zuelke (1987), school principals, in order to be successful, must be continually aware of the interacting factors that comprise the environment in which they work. Taking account of one situational factor such as organization structure, while ignoring other situational factors could lead to failure in leadership. The principal must try, on a daily basis, to bring about the optimum task-organization-people "fit, which is possible in his school. The extent to which the principal is able to bring about the optimum "fit" will determine the contingency approach and, the extent to which the principal will be viewed as a successful leader.

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